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# Memory, Funerals, and the Communion of Saints: Growing Old and Practices of Remembering

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# *Memory, Funerals, and the Communion of Saints: Growing Old and Practices of Remembering*

M. THERESE LYSAUGHT

*Lord, for your faithful people, life is changed, not ended.*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

When I was ten, I first glimpsed that death and growing old were connected. That June, I spent the first of many three-week summertime visits, *sans* siblings, *sans* parents, with my then eighty-five-year-old great-grandmother, Nonny Dodie, also known as Mary Waldo (hence "Dodie") Nall Thume Foltz. Twice widowed, Nonny was a farm wife who, upon the death of her second husband Alfred a few years earlier, had sold the farm and moved into a small house in "town." A wide-eyed girl from a middle-class Chicago suburb, I learned much during those summers in the small, rural community of Sweetser, Indiana (population 967). Life was hard-earned. Things wore out before they were thrown out. Nonny taught me how to make egg noodles and oatmeal cookies, applesauce, fried chicken, and wilted lettuce; that the makings of a good meal came mostly out of the cellar or were dropped off by friends; and that bacon grease was a necessary ingredient for making most dishes. She likewise taught me about aches and pains, support hose, and that teeth could be taken out at night.

These summers also afforded me my first foray amongst Protestants. I not only attended Nonny's Methodist church but, more formatively, spent a good

1. The Catholic Church, "Preface of Christian Death I," in *The Sacramentary*, English translation prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (New York: Collins World, 1974), p. 493.

bit of time with the initially forbidding ladies of the church's sewing guild (to whom my mother sternly warned me *not* to broadcast the fact that I was Catholic, for fear of negative repercussions or bringing scandal on my great-grandmother, I don't know which). We sewed bandages for the Red Cross.

It was in this setting that I first learned about obituaries. Each morning, as we sat at the breakfast table with the heavy and already-too-hot summer breeze blowing the smell of musty wood through adjustable screens, my great-grandmother would pick up the newspaper and, before reading anything else, turn to the obituaries. This was how she started her day. More often than not, she would slowly raise her hand to her mouth, clasping her chin, shaking her head, and say, "Well, Lord have mercy. So-and-so's dead." Then would follow the eulogy — her story of who the dead person was, what kind of work he was in, who he was related to, how long she'd known the family, the troubles and triumphs in their life, some personal anecdote. She would wonder aloud how the family was bearing up, read to me the funeral information, and invariably close with the refrain: "I guess I'm gettin' old. Every week it seems I lose someone else. God'll be taking me one of these days. I wonder who'll be left to go to my funeral."

At first I thought it was rather morbid to start one's day by seeing who had died. Over time, however, I began to realize that this morning routine and the funerals that Nonny subsequently attended were of a piece with the textures and rhythms of life in Sweetser. It was a rare day that Gladys (her "young," sixty-ish friend) did not come by to pick her up to drive her somewhere: to visit relations, to visit acquaintances, to visit especially those widowed and those whose children had moved away, and to visit Alfred's grave. I, of course, accompanied her. It seemed that most of my time in Sweetser was spent making visits.

What is more, Nonny was far from the only one in Sweetser attending funerals and making visits. How did I know? My great-grandmother also happened to write the "social" column for two local newspapers. Her phone and doorbell rang many times daily with folks calling in or stopping by to report "the news," to report who had gotten married or been born or died, who had come to town, who had come to visit, who they themselves had gone to see, what they'd discovered thereupon, as well as who-wore-what and what sort of food was served. It soon became clear to me that in Sweetser, Indiana, not only was it nice to be visited; it was newsworthy.

Now, while my Nonny's habits of newspaper reading and visiting were no doubt in part artifacts of life in a farming community as well as semi-covert means of gathering information for her column, I am convinced that these interconnected activities signaled something more profound. They bespoke a

set of underlying practices that were subtle yet deeply formative and that witnessed to convictions about what mattered most. Indeed, if our beliefs are the way we live — or, rather, if what we believe is known best through the actions and practices that concretely structure our lives — then the citizens of Sweetser, Indiana, in the 1970s believed it to be crucially important to remember others and to be, in turn, remembered.

I tell this story because I think the lives of my Nonny and her community display an alternative to the contemporary professional discourse on aging. Circumscribed as they were by the medical-therapeutic-social work paradigm that dominates analyses of aging, they simply carried on a way of life that witnessed to fundamentally different convictions about growing old. Although my Nonny passed on a dozen years ago and I unfortunately cannot query her directly, I am going to take the liberty of trying to reconstruct the sort of convictions required to sustain the practices in which she participated. I will argue that these convictions challenge both the contemporary demonization of aging and the trend that seeks to counter that demonization by rehabilitating the notion of “memory.” Increasingly in the therapeutic and pastoral literature, memory becomes both the primary service the elderly render to the community and the process through which growing old finds meaning. This rehabilitation of memory vis à vis aging arises from good intentions. Given that it subscribes to the same anthropological presuppositions as its opponents, however, it fails in the end to provide an adequate bulwark against those forces which would render the reality of growing old and care for the elderly among us unintelligible.

My Nonny’s advanced age, her rural piety, and her practice of obituary reading suggest that while memory is certainly not unimportant for understanding what it means to grow old, memory needs to be construed differently. In fact, I believe her life points toward a theological re-reading of memory, encountered concretely through the Christian practice of the funeral liturgy and its affirmation of the communion of saints. Such a re-reading, I will argue, suggests that for Christians, growing old is read best not through “memory” but rather through practices of remembering. Such practices provide Christian communities and those who grow old among them a more adequate response to contemporary realities of aging as well as theologically formed habits of discipleship.

To outline this argument will require a number of steps. I begin with a brief display of the phenomenon of aging and the role of memory as it is presented in contemporary discourse. This leads to a discussion of the notion of memory, both in its philosophically normative mode and theologically re-read. This theological re-reading is displayed through the practice of funerals

and the doctrine of the communion of saints through which Christians learn to remember the dead. These practices, in conjunction with remembering theologically construed, lead finally to an allied set of practices that circumscribes the realities of growing old within the discipleship of the body of Christ.

### The Ambiguity of Aging

Aging is ambiguous. As Helen Oppenheimer notes, old age can be characterized as both fruition and decay, a time of both fulfillment and loss.<sup>2</sup> Bernard Nash describes aging as a paradox: "Does it strike you as strange that we all want to live longer but none of us wants to grow old?"<sup>3</sup> Both sides of this ambiguous paradox deserve brief exploration.<sup>4</sup>

What fruits and fulfillment does growing older bring? Why might people rightly desire to live longer? Apart from hopes for a secular sort of immortality, a certain degree of advanced age is simply required in order to experience particular joys and pleasures. These joys come as serendipitous gifts as well as fruit intrinsic to lifelong work in the service of valued practices: seeing one's grandchildren, having "old" friends, celebrating decades of marriage, earning the honor that attends a lifelong career. Growing older provides the opportunity to truly master certain skills, to practice them effortlessly, and to share them with new generations of apprentices. The prospect of retirement, attractive to those whose financial security is assured, promises the leisure to shift one's energies to new pursuits and areas of interest, unfettered by the responsibilities of raising children. And as Oppenheimer notes, "just to have learnt more, to have seen more and to have more experience to draw upon are benefits bestowed by time which even the brightest youngster will have to wait a while to attain."<sup>5</sup>

As should come as no surprise, many elderly people do not feel "old" but rather maintain "that they still feel the same: perhaps still in their twenties."<sup>6</sup> The poet May Sarton, in her journal *At Seventy*, concurs and further remarks that she *loves* being "old":

2. Helen Oppenheimer, "Reflections on the Experience of Aging," in *Aging*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth (Philadelphia, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 41-44.

3. Bernard Nash, "Reworking the Image," *The Witness* 76 (January/February 1993): 11.

4. Given that the social construction of aging has already been well described by previous essays in this volume, I shall here note only the most general contours.

5. Oppenheimer, "Reflections on the Experience of Aging," p. 41.

6. Oppenheimer, "Reflections on the Experience of Aging," p. 41.

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What is it like to be seventy? If someone else had lived so long and could remember things sixty years ago with great clarity, she would seem very old to me. But I do not feel old at all, not as much a survivor as a person still on her way. . . . In the course of [a poetry reading] I said, "This is the best time of life. I love being old." At that point a voice from the audience asked loudly, "Why is it good to be old?" I answered spontaneously and a little on the defensive, for I sensed incredulity in the questioner, "Because I am more myself than I have ever been. There is less conflict. I am happier, more balanced, and" (I heard myself say rather aggressively) "more powerful." I felt it was rather an odd word, "powerful," but I think it is true. It might have been more accurate to say "I am better able to use my powers." I am surer of what my life is all about, have less self-doubt to conquer. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Further on in her journal, Sarton extends these reflections in the context of inverting one of the biggest bogeys of aging (especially for women): wrinkled faces.

Why do we worry about lines in our faces as we grow old? A face without lines that shows no mark of what has been lived through in a long life suggests something un-lived, empty, behind it. . . . Still, one mourns one's young face sometimes. It has to be admitted. I now use a night cream for the first time in my life. At the same time, as I went over photographs yesterday for a children's book of biographies in which I am included, I felt that my face is better now, and I like it better. That is because I am a far more complete and richer person than I was at twenty-five, when ambition and personal conflicts were paramount and there was a surface of sophistication that was not true of the person inside. Now I wear the inside person outside and am more comfortable with myself. In some ways, I am younger because I can admit vulnerability and more innocent because I do not have to pretend.<sup>8</sup>

The joys that attend aging, however, vary from person to person, especially as actual realities of growing old are shaped by personal context, class, gender, and culture. Even within the span of an individual life, one who finds seventy a time of fruition may find eighty-two more ambiguous or adverse. Indeed, cultural stereotypes generally construe growing old only in terms of its myriad possibilities for physical, mental, economic, and social diminish-

7. May Sarton, *At Seventy: A Journal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 10.

8. Sarton, *At Seventy*, pp. 60-61.



ment. Not only is aging accompanied for many by real financial impoverishment, the disappointments of dreams unattained, betrayal by children or spouses, and the burdens of caring for physically and mentally diminished parents, spouses, and friends, but it also carries with it the threat of "dementia, deafness, blindness, arthritis, helplessness, even repulsiveness; and worst of all the loneliness of outliving one's contemporaries."<sup>9</sup> We see in the elderly around us that

aging restricts mobility, diminishes senses, and impairs speech and thinking. It leads to a withdrawal from active public life, and forces us in time to rely on the help of others to carry out the most basic daily activities; . . . the loss, suffering, and diminishment of old age [entail] disengagement, isolation, and dependence.<sup>10</sup>

Those who grow old inevitably find their lives becoming undone on a number of levels — their bodies and their minds begin shockingly to fail; capacities diminish; former proficiencies fade; youthful appearance disappears. Identity transmutes, as the former centers of their lives — either career or home — are literally taken away. Their communities unravel in a particularly poignant way, as they find themselves facing again and again the deaths of those with whom they have lived for decades, with whom their entire lives have been intertwined: parents, siblings, spouses, children, mentors, friends. It seems — with all of this taken together — that as one grows old, one's very self dissolves.

This latter dynamic lies at the root of contemporary constructions of aging. Just as Sartre describes the bounty of growing old in terms of the full bloom of her true "self," it is the dissolution of the self that is aging's bane. Given the modern positioning of the self as the source and end of all meaning, anything that threatens it will be feared. Indeed, even the most cursory survey of contemporary literature on aging reveals fear to be a dominant motif. The nature of this fear, however, is culturally determined. As Lucien Richard notes: "the fear of becoming old in our society is determined by the fear of losing those elements which constitute life's goal, and are perceived as the foundation of self-worth and personhood."<sup>11</sup> Thus behind the "problems" that aging poses within late-capitalistic, technologically hyperdriven, liberal Western culture lies a set of anthropological assumptions, convictions about what it means to be a "person."

9. Oppenheimer, "Reflections on the Experience of Aging," p. 43.

10. Drew Christiansen, "A Catholic Perspective," in *Aging, Spirituality and Religion: A Handbook*, ed. Melvin A. Kimble et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 404.

11. Lucien Richard, "Toward a Theology of Aging," *Science et Esprit* 34, no. 3 (1982): 274.

The clearest and most compelling display of this anthropology can be found in H. Tristram Engelhardt's unvarnished articulation of the logic of liberal capitalist culture, *The Foundations of Bioethics*. Here Engelhardt identifies those elements required for personhood, namely that an entity be "self-conscious, rational, free to choose, and in possession of a sense of moral concern."<sup>12</sup> While others might name these characteristics slightly differently (as autonomy, freedom, self-sufficiency, etc.), a review of the traumas of aging listed above suggests that aging ultimately attacks and impairs personhood: rationality and self-consciousness are effaced via dementia and the impairment of speech and thinking, economic impoverishment, physical afflictions such as the restriction of mobility, blindness, deafness, arthritis, and the need to rely on others ravage freedom-to-choose and self-sufficiency.<sup>13</sup>

That aging can so dismantle the constituents of personhood has led Drew Christiansen to identify "the twin fears" of aging as the fear of dependence and the fear of abandonment and neglect.<sup>14</sup> While these may seem to point in different directions, they are integrally related. The prospect of dependence — whether it be physical, financial, or decisional — entails the loss of autonomy and therefore, in our culture, compromises one's status as a person. To not be a "person" is to be vulnerable; civil and social protections apply almost exclusively to persons. In fact, Engelhardt describes how the loss of the above abilities moves one from being a "person in the strict sense," to whom the full gamut of rights and protections applies, to being a person "in the social sense." Persons in the social sense find no intrinsic basis for protection and are accorded such rights only insofar as they are important to "full" persons or serve some socially useful function. If they are not or do not, the further they slip away from the norm, the more open they are to any sort of treatment, including the ultimate in abandonment, namely, "being killed painlessly at nonmalevolent whim."<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is not unreasonable to fear dependence, abandonment, and neglect under current cultural circumstances.

12. H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 136.

13. Apart from discussions of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, there is little or no sense that aging impacts one's "possession of a sense of moral concern." In fact, the elderly are often described in terms that render them guardians of "morality" or spirituality.

14. Christiansen, "A Catholic Perspective," p. 406.

15. Engelhardt, *Foundations of Bioethics*, p. 146.



## Memory or Remembering?

A recent move designed to temper the realities of dependency and stave off the threat of abandonment and neglect has been to relocate the center of the geriatric self not in rationality and autonomy but rather in "memory."

Indeed, memory has become one of the major motifs for giving meaning to the process of growing old. Whether it provides the basis for the recently developed pastorally or psychologically mediated therapeutic practice of "life review" or constitutes the elderly's specific contribution to society, the relationship between memory and aging is often depicted as follows:

When we reach the "noon of life," the movement is toward the "twilight"; there is a turning inward. Our consciousness naturally reflects upon who we are, and we search for a vision of what we might become. Most of us are familiar with the proclivity of old people to tell stories about the past. . . . What a pity it is that so many of us are loath to "waste the time" to listen. . . . The story telling of the aging is a source for enriched memory and a stimulus for the imagination. . . . Another way to say this is that as we grow older the *time* we have (or appear to have) diminishes, but the *space* of our world should expand. Death comes closer and we can no longer think in terms of time measured in many years ahead, but we can gain more freedom to explore the space of our inner world. This is one way to describe a "second childhood," which is a bit like Paul Ricoeur's "second naivete." We move into what some have called a receptive mode of consciousness — as opposed to a mode of action — where images and free association within space take precedence over temporal, logical thinking, with its desire for prediction and control. We become like the little child, not in the literal foolishness of pretending to be one, but in the graceful wisdom of one who has recovered the capacity of wonder and surprise.<sup>16</sup>

Through memory, the elderly both have something to contribute to those who would only listen and find a place to explore their very selves in creative freedom.

16. Urban T. Holmes, "Worship and Aging: Memory and Repentance," in *Ministry with the Aging*, ed. William M. Clements (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), pp. 96-97. One of my, shall we say, "older" colleagues, Father Jack McGrath, remarked upon reading this passage that "many, many older people *love* prediction and control." I think Father McGrath's response points to the possibility that many, many older people would not recognize themselves in the literature on aging. This leads one to speculate on how this professional discourse seeks to shape the elderly in specific normative ways, and to postulate what ends such formation may serve.

This rehabilitation of memory in the service of aging stems from a number of sources. Historical memory seems to be primarily the reserve of the elderly — thus, it is something of value that they, and they alone, possess. Phenomenologically, the turn to memory finds validation in stereotypes — the “proclivity of old people to tell stories about the past” or the sense that elders tend to “live in the past.” Biologically, short-term recall seems to become less reliable as one grows old but long-term memory often seems to sharpen.

But can “memory” so construed, and the practices it engenders, transmute the distress of dependency or provide a new status for the elderly among the community that will deter the threat of abandonment and neglect? Can it provide an account that makes our continued care for the elderly intelligible? Unfortunately, I think it cannot. Memory as it functions in this discourse serves simply as another way to shore up the disintegrating self; it seeks to establish a new basis for value and identity, apart from job or family, rooted in the individual. And for many who grow old, this will simply be insufficient. To show how this is the case requires a display of how memory is constructed within this discourse. For that we turn, of course, to Augustine.

### *From Augustine to Alzheimer's*

The classic starting point for contemporary understandings of memory is Augustine's *Confessions*.<sup>17</sup> In Book Ten, his reflections on memory span no fewer than thirteen chapters (chaps. 8-20). The conclusions that he reaches in the course of these meditations seem rather obvious, indicating their commonsense nature as well as their historic influence on millennia of Western thought. Augustine begins in chapter eight with a simple and straightforward observation, that memory is basically an archive — of images, knowledge, and experiences accumulated over a lifetime. It is “like a great field or a spacious palace,” he notes, “a storehouse for countless images,” a cloister, a vast sanctuary (X.8). This archive is definitely private, something within us, “an inner place” (X.9). But this description is not sufficient, he notes, for memory is surely more than merely a place; it is also an ability, a capacity. The idea of memory, then, implies not only the sum total of stored images but also the capacity to store and retrieve these images.

Augustine's study of memory continues in this vein, momentum building, and in chapter fourteen he makes a very important shift. Not only does

17. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961). References will be given parenthetically within the text.

he render memory as an archival faculty merely possessed by an individual; memory becomes equated with the self:

But the mind and the memory are one and the same. We even call the memory the mind. . . . Yet I do not understand the power of memory that is in myself, although without it I could not even speak of myself. . . . The power of the memory is great, O Lord. It is awe-inspiring in its profound and incalculable complexity. Yet it is my mind: it is my self (X.14, 16, 17).<sup>18</sup>

At this climax, two points become clear. First, memory is cognitive, an intellectual faculty and process, located *within* ourselves — "it is my mind." Second, "it is myself," the very essence of one's identity and being; or as Brian Horne notes, for Augustine "memory and personhood are co-terminous. . . . without memory the person cannot exist."<sup>19</sup>

This Augustinian position, that memory is internal, individual, a private storehouse of images and the ability to retrieve them, constitutive of self and identity, continues to powerfully dominate contemporary thought.<sup>20</sup> Richard Schaeffler, for example, reflecting on the memorial/anamnestic dimension of the Eucharist, attributes three powers to memory, one of which is

to *discover ourselves* among our shifting experiences, so that we may construct, out of the abundance of stories we could tell, that one story of our own individual and social life that allows us to attribute that abundance of experiences to ourselves as their 'subjects.' This task is controlled by the idea of the 'self,' that is, by the conscious purpose of

18. David Keck observes that "Many, perhaps most, modern theologians follow Hume in his shift from talk of a soul to concentration on a 'self.' This 'self' becomes the referent of bundles of impressions, ideas, and thoughts which exhibit continuity over time in each person's own consciousness . . ." (*Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], p. 106). Given Augustine's reflections on memory, we might trace this back farther than Hume.

19. Brian L. Horne, "Person as Confession: Augustine of Hippo," in *Persons, Divine and Human*, ed. Christoph Schwobel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 71.

20. See, for example, K. Brynolf Lyon, "The Unwelcome Presence: The Practical Moral Intention of Remembering," *Encounter* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 139; Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 126; Marjorie Proctor-Smith, "Liturgical Anamnesis and Women's Memory: 'Something Missing,'" *Worship* 61 (September 1987): 407-8; Dale M. Schlitt, "Temporality, Experience and Memory: Theological Reflections on Aging," *Eglise et Theologie* 16 (1985): 89; and Richard Schaeffler, "Therefore We Remember . . .": The Connection between Remembrance and Hope in the Present of the Liturgical Celebration. Religious-Philosophical Reflections on a Religious Understanding of Time," in *The Meaning of the Liturgy*, ed. A. Haussling (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 15-16.

discovering within our life-situations the one characteristic way in which we have appropriated the external circumstances and their changes as *our own story*; how, in an equally characteristic way, we may have failed in that task; or how we have lost ourselves in the flood of events and retrieved ourselves from it.<sup>21</sup>

Thus according to this account, memory is the vehicle through which I construct myself, through which I grasp my identity. It is the existential essence of the individual.

Reflections on memory and aging likewise reflect this standard account of memory. In Urban Holmes's earlier comments, for example, memory is found by turning inward to the space of our inner world. It is an intellectual process, an exercise of reflective consciousness, the function of which is to discover or construct our self and identity.

This way of construing memory vis à vis aging is troubling, however, in a number of ways. First, it may mask a latent focus on productivity as the locus of individual worth; pacifying a utilitarian calculus, those with memories have something to offer.<sup>22</sup> Second, as reflected in Holmes's comments, memory is situated as that activity particularly fitting to those who have no future. Dale Schlitt, likewise, in a reflection on aging and memory states: "Imperceptibly the threshold is crossed where one tends to locate one's primary point of reference no longer in the future or in those with whom one presently lives and works but in persons and events now recalled from the past."<sup>23</sup> But a third point is most problematic. If memory plays such an important role in the meaning of aging and is so crucial for personal identity, what do we make of the fact that as people age, memory is often precisely that which they lose? We are familiar with phrases like "she's not who she once was," "he's really no longer himself," and how those with diminished capacity are referred to as "shells of their former selves." Insofar as memory, premised as the foundation of the self which is internal and intellectual, recapitulates the terms of the liberal construction of the self that gives rise to the threats of dependence, abandonment, and neglect, it cannot withstand aging's ultimate threat.

Memory as remedy for the meaninglessness of aging fails most dramatically when faced with the dreaded loss of mental ability, captured most viv-

21. Schaeffler, "Therefore We Remember," p. 20.

22. In other words, to caricature this position: the elderly no longer have anything to contribute to society *except* their memories or "wisdom," which, as a valuable commodity under a market model, can be traded for our continued support of them.

23. Schlitt, "Temporality, Experience, and Memory," p. 99. It is interesting that this observation occurs in a subsection entitled "The Aging from an Augustinian Perspective on Memory."

idly in the possibility of Alzheimer's disease. Not only does Alzheimer's entail the most radical sort of dependence over a period of years or decades; the victim's very self disintegrates before the eyes of those who care for and love him as he loses not only his abilities and personality but even his very memories. This radical loss of self no appeal to memory can salve. Consequently, caring for those with Alzheimer's becomes completely unintelligible.

This is precisely the issue taken up by David Keck in his compelling book *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God*.<sup>24</sup> Like Augustine, Keck finds memory to be awe-inspiring in its power and complexity, and key to individual identity. But at the same time, through caring for his mother as Alzheimer's disease deconstructs her self, he finds that the reality of the disease challenges deeply held convictions about memory and selfhood which further challenges theological beliefs grounded in this anthropology:

Ontologically, what happens in Alzheimer's? What becomes of a person and her memories? Is there a metaphysical basis for the human person which this disease does not destroy? The human subject in many ways lies at the center of contemporary theological reflection; we are presumed to be rational, self-actualizing, and intentional. But can we be confident about theologies predicated on a self-conscious, decision-making subject when a person may live for over ten years without any subjecthood? . . . How is it possible to speak of a personal relationship with God, when there seems to be no person left? Does the Holy Spirit depend on a conscious subject in order to be present or to provide comfort to a person?<sup>25</sup>

The above perspectives on memory emerge from anthropological reflection — Augustine's reflections on the working of his own mind, philosophical reflection on the construction of one's own personal narrative, and ethnographic reflection on the behavior and opportunities of those who grow old. But Keck's questions raise theological issues and as such require a

24. As will be clear, I am deeply indebted to David Keck's remarkable reflections on memory in the second chapter of this exceptional book.

25. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, pp. 39-40. Rabbi Hershel Matt, a nursing home chaplain, casts this question in terms of the *imago dei*. Noting that traditionally the notion of creation-in-the-image refers to intellectual, rational, psychological, or spiritual human faculties, he asks: "What can be said, however, when mind itself falters and regresses, and when such mental capacities as reason, logic, memory, recognition, response, imagination, anticipation — all of them surely aspects of the 'image' — begin to deteriorate and function only feebly or intermittently?" ("Fading Image of God? Theological Reflections of a Nursing Home Chaplain," *Judaism* 36 [Winter 1987]: 78). His conclusion is that the image of God is indeed effaced.



theological starting point. A theological account of memory should begin with God's way of remembering, a thick description of which is found best, of course, in Scripture.

*Memory Theologically Re-Read*

In Scripture we find that God remembers. From the beginning, God's remembering emerges as radically different from human memory as described above. First, God's remembering is crucial for human existence. To be remembered by God is to be held in existence, to live. To be forgotten, on the other hand, means death: "not to be remembered," Keck notes, "is 'not to exist.' . . . in Psalm 88, the person whom God has forgotten has no strength, is already in the grave, already in 'the regions dark and deep.'"<sup>26</sup>

But God's remembering is not simply the generic substrate of existence, a philosophical concept of 'being.' It is concrete, particular, pervasive.<sup>27</sup> To be remembered by God is to be healed, to have one's prayers heard and answered, and "to be assured of God's tender concern." Yahweh remembers specific individuals; God "remembered" Rachel (Gen. 30:22) and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:11, 19-20) and answered their prayers for children. The blinded Samson's strength is reborn when God answers his prayer to be remembered (Judg. 16:28-30). God remembers not only individuals but Israel as well, as God remembers the covenant (e.g., Gen. 9:16; 19:29; Lev. 26:42-43; Deut. 9:27; Ps. 104:8-10; 105:45; 110:4-5; Ezek. 16:60-63).<sup>28</sup>

Thus, a number of characteristics differentiate God's remembering from human memory. To begin with, it is cast as a verb rather than as a noun. Scripture rarely speaks of God's memory per se; God's memory is known only through God's acts. For God, therefore, remembering is not a cognitive, mental operation; rather, it entails efficacious, "providential, salvific activity."<sup>29</sup> As

26. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 43. See also Proctor-Smith: "to be forgotten by God is to die; to be remembered by God is to live" ("Liturgical Anamnesis and Women's Memory," p. 412).

27. Merold Westphal's account of Christian memory likewise emphasizes this particularity: "Christian memory is radically different from Platonic recollection. . . . Christian memory opens itself to an historical event in all of its unique particularity. . . . The term *event* is appropriate here because it signifies that Christian memory resists the dissolution of the temporal and particular in the eternal and universal" ("Lest We Forget," *Perspectives* [February 1996]: 11).

28. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, pp. 43-48, and Proctor-Smith, "Liturgical Anamnesis and Women's Memory," p. 410.

29. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 47.

such, while God may remember the past (or remember it not, an act characterized as forgiveness), God's remembering primarily implies presence; when God remembers, God becomes present to individuals and to Israel. Consequently, God's remembering is other-oriented. We do not find God reviewing images in the divine mind in order to construct the divine "personal" identity; rather, God's acts of remembering, while contributing to God's identity, are primarily acts that constitute God's relationship with another. Thus, to speak of God's memory is not to speak first of identity but, as Keck notes, "to speak of God's fidelity."<sup>30</sup>

As relational, moreover, God's remembering calls forth a response.<sup>31</sup> As God faithfully remembers individuals, Israel, and the covenant, God likewise calls and expects Israel to faithfully remember as well. Keck notes, "after the great work of liberation wrought by God in the Exodus, itself a manifestation of God's faithful memory, it is Israel's duty to remember these deeds and to employ this communal memory as a spur to the fulfillment of the law."<sup>32</sup> Again, God does not want simple mental recall on the part of Israel; remembering entails action, namely, observance of the law, the remembering of God and others. "To remember God is a commandment," writes Keck, "but likewise so is remembering human beings. 'Remember those who are in prison' (Heb. 13:3) and 'remember the poor' (Gal. 2:10)."<sup>33</sup> Such remembering on the part of Israel and the early church entails not mental recollection but rather concrete acts of presence and service.

In practicing the Law, the lives of the faithful become a tapestry of remembering. Although the memory of God's deeds and the observance of the Law are essential to who they are as a people, however, Israel knows that the root of its identity lies not in its own memory but in the acts through which God remembered the Israelites, liberated them, covenanted with them, and constituted them as a people. It is God's remembering, therefore, that confers identity.

But while it is characteristic of God to remember, it is characteristic of humanity to forget. Time and again, Israel forgets the Lord, in spite of the imprecations of the psalmists and prophets ("Do not forget the works of the Lord," Ps. 78:7), and forgets the widows, orphans, and strangers among them.

30. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 45.

31. As Proctor-Smith notes: "the notion of remembrance found in the Hebrew Scriptures is dialogical, effective and concrete (or embodied). It is dialogical because it presumes a relationship between God and people; effective because the remembering calls forth a response, whether from God or from people; concrete because it involves specifics such as names, people, actions, and objects . . ." ("Liturgical Anamnesis and Women's Memory," p. 410).

32. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 46.

33. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 55.

Such forgetfulness of God and neighbor is equated with the descent into sin — either the sin of idolatry or the sin of injustice. Such forgetfulness of God and neighbor, time and again, sunders Israel's relation with God and precipitates its demise.

Yet although Israel and humanity forgets, God remains faithful. God continues to remember even when forgotten. This is the essence of the paschal mystery, God's penultimate act of remembering. Here, the character of God's remembering as faithful, life-giving, efficacious, other-oriented, relationship-constituting, and identity-conferring is seen in all its fullness. God remembers us to the point of assuming human flesh and living among us, suffering our forgetfulness in his very body, and in rising, forgiving — or remembering our sins no more. Through God's act of remembering in Jesus we are given life anew; our enslavement to the tyranny of existential forgetfulness — death — is vanquished.

Our task is then very simple: "Do this in remembrance of me." Thus, at the center of the life of discipleship, itself a tapestry of remembering, we remember God's great act of remembering which confers our identity; we celebrate the Eucharist. This remembering is not simply recall of a past event but is instead *anamnetic*, "an effective remembering that makes something genuinely past to be present and active in the community today."<sup>34</sup> We experience God's great act of remembering as present.

With this presence, eucharistic remembrance transforms our identity as we become a member of the one who is remembering us, a member of the body of Christ. As Merold Westphal notes, looking at remembrance from the obverse:

To forget . . . is to prevent the forgotten from shaping our thought, feeling, and action as it should. . . . When Jesus invites us to eat the bread and drink the wine "in remembrance of me" . . . here memory is not the ability to answer questions but *the openness to having our lives (trans)formed by what we attend to.*<sup>35</sup>

The key to this transformation is inherent in remembering itself. When we "remember," for Westphal, "the remembered event is to be renewed, or better, allowed to renew itself upon us in order that we may be renewed in a variety of senses that include regeneration and conversion."<sup>36</sup>

34. Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), p. 234.

35. Westphal, "Lest We Forget," p. 11.

36. Westphal, "Lest We Forget," p. 11.

As the elements are transformed into the body of Christ, eucharistic remembrance embeds our relationship with the divine, our renewed identities, in our very bodies. As our bodies become transformed by the events and Person we attend to, liturgical remembrance reveals that God remembers through the material, that the material world and indeed our very bodies — both individual and corporate — mediate God's grace. As Marjorie Proctor-Smith notes:

Liturgical anamnesis involves not only remembering with the mind but also remembering with the body (individual and collective). More than the repetition of words, liturgical anamnesis involves the use of the body in gesture and movement, sometimes familiar, sometimes awkward. This bodiliness reminds us of the embodiment of divine activity in history, the Word made flesh. It also brings, experientially and dramatically, divine activity into the present, not only in time but in space. The human body and human community then are seen as the locus for this activity. This embodied remembering is found at the center of all Christian liturgy insofar as that liturgy remembers, and remembering celebrates, the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ crucified, dead, risen and present in the power of the Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

Through the Eucharist, our bodies shaped and transformed by God's remembering become enabled to mediate God's remembering to others, as we, through lives of discipleship, engage in concrete acts of remembering.

Theologically construed, therefore, the relationship between memory, selfhood, and identity emerges very differently from the Augustinian-based liberal account with which we began. It is not, primarily, that identity and the self reside in one's own personal recollection of one's own history; rather, identity is conferred through God's remembering of us and, correlatively, through our faithful remembering of God and each other. But it is clear that many of us are far more adept at forgetting than at remembering. The next question, then, is where do we learn how to remember? More specifically, where do we learn how to remember each other in the way that God remembers? Oddly enough, within the Christian community, one of the primary places we learn how to remember the living is where we learn to remember the dead — through that remarkable Christian practice of remembering, namely, the practice of funerals.<sup>38</sup>

37. Proctor-Smith, "Liturgical Anamnesis and Women's Memory," p. 409.

38. Other liturgical practices would be worth exploring in this regard, including the practice of reconciliation, the kiss of peace, the sacrament of anointing of the sick, prayers of petition, the litany of saints, and marriage.

### **Funerals and the Communion of Saints**

That Christians hold funerals seems neither particularly remarkable nor unique. But what Christians do and proclaim in the course of funeral rites is rather extraordinary. For here Christians remember those whose minds and bodies have disintegrated in the most radical of ways, whose lives have certainly "changed but not ended." In doing so, funerals shape and train us to remember each other, particularly those whose minds and bodies have begun to diminish, those who grow old among us, whose lives likewise are changing but not ended. As they proclaim that the dead are indeed alive, the funeral rites remind us that what is determinative for our identity is not that we are selves but that we are saints. In doing so, they provide a radically different lens through which to see — and thereby remember — those among us who are isolated and marginalized. Finally, as we participate in the rites, we learn to remember as God remembers — as concrete, particular, active, other-oriented, present, eucharistic, embodied, life-giving, relationship-constituting, and reconciling. In order to display how the rites train and shape us to remember as God remembers, let us turn to the Roman Catholic *Order of Christian Funerals*.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Remembering the Dead*

Even the most superficial glance reveals that funerals embody God's way of remembering. No mere mental meditation or recollection of a person's life, funerals are concrete acts undertaken by the community, the body of Christ,

39. In this essay, I will refer only to the Roman Catholic funeral rites, given that this is the tradition out of which I work and with which I am most familiar. The rite can be found in the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *Order of Christian Funerals: The Roman Ritual, Revised by Decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and Published by Authority of Pope Paul VI/Prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1989). It is important to note, however, that the Roman Catholic rites, in their revised form, are quite similar to those used within other Christian denominations, especially insofar as the various rites retrieve early church practices and root their prayers in Scripture. See, for example, discussions of the Lutheran *Burial of the Dead* in H. P. V. Renner's "A Christian Rite of Burial; An Instrument of Pastoral Care," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 26 (May 1992): 72-77, and Eric E. Dyck, "Lex Orandi; a New Lex Credendi: 'The Burial of the Dead,' 1978 from an Historical Perspective," *Consensus* 18, no. 2 (1992): 63-73; of the Presbyterian rite in the 1993 *Book of Common Worship* in Stanley Hall, "Renewing the Rites of Death," *Insights* 110 (Fall 1994): 39-50; and of the Orthodox rite in Kallistos Ware, "'One Body in Christ': Death and the Communion of Saints," *Sorbornost* 3, no. 2 (1981): 179-91.



oriented toward particular individuals (both the deceased and those who mourn). Through the acts that comprise the various rites, the church challenges the contemporary existential credo: Christians do not die alone. Rather, death within the Christian tradition is an experience of ongoing, communal presence. Again and again in these rites, a world in which the living remember, accompany, and care for the dead is concretely rendered. Through a continuous set of rites and practices, the church maintains a constant and unbroken presence to those who are dying beyond the point of their burial.<sup>40</sup> This reflects the historic practice of the church of offering not only presence to the dying but also assistance to the dead on their journey to heaven. A powerful embodiment of presence and solidarity — the funeral procession — opens the liturgy, as the deceased is carried in by his or her family and friends, borne aloft, and set at the center of the community for the celebration. The community gathers not merely as a voluntary association of family, friends, and acquaintances but as persons tied together ontologically — as the *ecclesia*.

Moreover, funerals are eucharistic. Contrary to secular practice, the center and focus of the funeral liturgy is not primarily the deceased but rather Jesus Christ, the paschal mystery, celebrated in the Eucharist.<sup>41</sup> The prayers and

40. The rites begin before death with those contained in the *Pastoral Care of the Sick and Dying: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*. Here, the community has been present to the dying person with prayer, the reading of Scripture, and communion or Eucharist; these rites end with the "Prayer at the Moment of Death." This process continues with the *Order of Christian Funerals*. Comprised of much more than the funeral liturgy itself, the *Order* circumscribes each moment between death and burial through a series of rites that span the days following death. These rites include the "Prayers after Death," the rite of "Gathering in the Presence of the Body," the "Vigil for the Deceased," the "Office for the Dead," the "Transfer of the Body to the Church," the rite of the "Reception of the Body at the Church," the "Funeral Liturgy" itself, the "Final Commendation," the "Procession to the Place of Committal," and the "Rite of Committal." These rites can be combined in a variety of ways. Thus, the one who has died is constantly in the company of family and friends, and, through their prayers and practices, in the company of the church. Importantly, those who mourn likewise remain in the presence of community and the deceased.

41. The pastoral notes to the rites stress this focus in their comments on the readings and homily, first noting that "in the celebration of the word at the funeral liturgy, the biblical readings may not be replaced by nonbiblical readings," although nonbiblical readings may supplement those from Scripture during prayer services with the family (no. 23). Furthermore, the notes remark: "A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy . . . but there is never to be a eulogy. Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord. . . . The homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God's love and the mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well" (no. 27). The rites do al-

readings of the liturgy, while giving voice to grief and lament, preach primarily the Good News of God's remembrance — of the forgiveness of sins wrought through the paschal mystery and of Christ's victory over death in the resurrection. Furthermore, in a funeral context, the Eucharist itself may take on new meaning for many, truly becoming "that sacrament of God's participation in our brokenness";<sup>42</sup> for although we proclaim the joy of the resurrection, as we repeat the words of institution Christ is present as the crucified. We are reminded that God is not distant from pain, suffering, lament, death, and grief but rather is especially and powerfully present in their midst.

As Christ's death encompasses the death of our companions, we have confidence that in Christ's body, they will find the promise of the resurrection. As eucharistic, Christian funerals are no gnostic practice; they are deeply embodied. The body of the deceased is central to the rites.<sup>43</sup> Over and again, the community exercises care with and for that body. Traditionally, the body has been washed, anointed, kissed, carried, sprinkled with holy water, and anointed.<sup>44</sup> But equally central to the structure of the funeral rites are other bodies — specifically, the body of Jesus crucified and risen and the members of the community as the body of Christ.

With bodies so juxtaposed, the rites locate our lives and death within the context of Christ's death and resurrection and display that this resurrection is the resurrection of the body. For Christians, this is not merely a wish rooted

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low for eulogizing, however, after the Liturgy of the Eucharist has concluded: "a member or friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins" (no. 170).

42. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 39.

43. It is also in this context that the practice of cremation — which is now permitted within the Roman Catholic Church as long as the body of the deceased is present for the funeral liturgy — remains troubling for Christians. For perspectives on this issue see H. Richard Rutherford, "Honoring the Dead: Catholics and Cremation," *Worship* 64 (November 1990): 482-94, and Ware, "'One Body in Christ,'" p. 182.

44. Current rites limit the interaction with the body to sprinkling with holy water and incensing. Earlier practices included that of the bishop and all the faithful sharing with the deceased the kiss of peace (a practice continued in the Orthodox Church; see Ware, "'One Body in Christ,'" p. 181) and the anointing of the body after the funeral liturgy (see H. Richard Rutherford, *The Death of a Christian: The Rite of Funerals*, Studies in the Reformed Rites of the Catholic Church, vol. 7 [New York: Pueblo, 1980], p. 23). Robert Hoeffner critiques current funeral rites in "A Pastoral Evaluation of the Rite of Funerals," *Worship* 55 (November 1981): 482-99. He argues for a return to concrete acts of care for the body of the deceased by members of the community — including preparation of the body and vigils in the home. He suggests that our current distance from the bodies of the dead derives both from the abdication of the preparation of the corpse to funeral homes and from the death-denying attitude of contemporary culture.

in an archaic cosmology but rather a fundamental theological claim. It is a claim that our bodies are an integral part of who we are. The resurrection affirms that God will raise us to new life, "'Us' — not some disembodied spirits, but the full persons he knew, loved and saved."<sup>45</sup> It is a claim that God's grace is mediated through the material: in the incarnation, God became human flesh and dwelt among us; in the Passion, it was Christ's body that was crucified; in the Eucharist, Christ is truly present in the elements of bread and wine; as we partake of these elements, approaching the altar with our bodies, eating and drinking, we become the very body of Christ; and in the eschaton, it is this very materiality of creation that God will transform and glorify. So Christian practice believes that human bodies, even after death, mediate God's grace.

Funerals likewise remind us that God's remembering is life-giving and -sustaining. Again and again, the prayers of the rites invoke God's remembrance of the deceased, petitioning for concrete acts of presence and care. For example, among a multitude of entreaties, the prayers ask God to "have mercy on your servant" (no. 72), to "lead him/her over the waters of death" (no. 167), to "welcome him/her into the halls of the heavenly banquet" (no. 167), to forgive their sins, and to give them refreshment, rest, and peace. That the church believes that God can continue to remember in this way embodies the powerful conviction: through concrete acts of remembrance God continues to hold the one who has died in being. The one who has died is alive.

### *Remembering with the Angels and Martyrs*

And he is not alone. Not only is God present to the one who has died, but the rite summons the hosts of heaven to accompany and welcome the dead: "May the angels lead you to paradise; May the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem" (no. 176). The rites ask God to "admit him/her to the joyful company of your saints" (no. 164). The dead, we believe, are alive in the company or, better, the "communion of saints."

In popular parlance, the notion of the communion of saints seems primarily eschatological; it says something about what happens to people when they die. But, as Elizabeth Johnson demonstrates in her valuable retrieval of the doctrine in *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*, historically it is rather first and more centrally

45. John P. Meier, "Catholic Funerals in Light of Scripture," *Worship* 48 (April 1974): 212.

ecclesiological. The concept indicates as much — or more — about the nature of the church as it does about the nature of the afterlife.

The doctrine emerges out of Paul's use of the term "the saints" (*hagioi*). For Paul, the term "saint" refers not primarily to the dead, nor primarily to individuals, nor even to morally or spiritually righteous exemplars, but rather to the community as a whole, a community made holy by the presence and activity of God.<sup>46</sup> As Johnson notes,

The net effect of being part of this community is that all members are considered participants in the holy life of God. This comes about not because of a state of life they choose or a set of virtues they practice, not because of their innocence or perfection, but because of the gift of the Spirit who is given to all. The Spirit of life who raised Jesus from the dead is poured out on them and they are clothed with Christ, being transformed into the very image of Christ. As always, this is a gift freely given. Its effect is to create a community in grace. . . . Its extensive use in reference to the community of living Christians reflects the heat and vigor of their sense of the presence and action of God in their midst through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which leads to a sharing of physical and spiritual goods among themselves.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, the term "saint" is a theological and ecclesial claim. Through God's gracious action and vital, ongoing presence within the community, God has rendered those baptized into the church as "saints" and has rendered the church as a whole a "communion of saints." The term further indicates the scope of the church, confidently positing "a bond of companionship among living persons themselves who, though widely separated geographically, form one church community."<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, it confidently posits a bond of companionship between the living and the dead, a confidence rooted not in a naive realism or an archaic cosmology but in an ecclesial and sacramental ontology. The practical and theological foundation for the communion of saints is baptism and the Eucharist.

46. As Johnson notes, this is the term's most extensive meaning in the New Testament, occurring some sixty times. The term is multivalent as well, however, "referring on different occasions in the New Testament to the angels, to pious Jews who have already died, or to Christians who die under persecution. . . . In addition to the general notion of Israel as the holy people of God, some scholars believe that the specific background for [its referent to the Christian community as a whole] is found in late Jewish apocalyptic literature where 'the saints' describe the elect who will share in the blessings of the messianic age" (*Friends of God and Prophets*, p. 60).

47. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, p. 60.

48. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, p. 7.



Through baptism we become members of the church; through the Eucharist we become members of one body, the bonds of which death's destructive power cannot sever.

Thus, through the Eucharist, through the communion of holy things, not only are the living rendered a communion of saints, but insofar as death cannot separate us from the love of God and membership in the body of Christ, the dead remain with us, tied to us in one church, one body, one communion. As the *Order of Christian Funerals* affirms,

In partaking in the body of Christ, all are given a foretaste of eternal life in Christ and are united with Christ, with each other, and with all the faithful, living and dead: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). (no. 143)

Bonded together in communion, the living and dead continue to care for each other through practices of remembrance. The earliest evidence of Christian funerary practices indicates that prayer of the living for the dead has been considered part of appropriate care for the dead since the beginning. Early Christians offered prayers of praise and thanksgiving, prayed to accompany the deceased on their journeys, and asked God that the deceased would find rest. The church continues this prayer today. As eucharistic and anamnetic, through prayer we come into each other's presence in an active, embodied way, speaking concretely, going out of ourselves toward the other in a way that is creative, healing, life-giving, and salvific. Keck concurs:

Such a prayer affirms that our responsibilities as caregivers do not cease. Prayer then is not just a mental act of memory and commemoration. It is a real work of the soul which links the living, the dead, and their God. It is a real work of caregiving. (We may add, that in the churches which believe in intercessory saints, caregiving prayer is offered both for the dead and by the dead — the deceased, too, are caregivers).<sup>49</sup>

The doctrine of the communion of saints echoes this belief that the deceased act as caregivers as well; they remain active in prayer in remembering the living. According to Johnson, with the practice of remembering and venerating the martyrs arose the practice of directly calling on them for prayers. Within this context, the martyrs were seen as partners, co-disciples, mutual

49. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 145.



companions in Christ, reflecting a vigorous sense of continuing companionship between the dead and the living. Just as living members of the church would pray for each other in their struggles to be faithful disciples, so the martyrs were called upon for their prayers as "a specific way of evoking the solidarity that existed between pilgrims on earth and those who had been sealed with the victory of Christ. These latter were asked to participate in Christ's continuing intercession and remember before God their brothers and sisters who had not yet run the whole course."<sup>50</sup> This understanding of the prayer of the dead was simply an extension of the ordinary Christian practice of the church as communion, the practice of praying for others for support and specific intentions. As Johnson notes:

Scripture encourages persons to pray for all human beings and for specific needs and is replete with examples of people praying for each other. . . . Such prayer functions as a key way of expressing love and concern for others. . . . If living persons can and do ask each other for the encouragement of prayer, must that stop when persons die? . . . The saints in heaven . . . are with their companions on earth in one community of grace. [If so], then calling on a saint in heaven to "pray for us" is one particular, limited, concrete expression of this solidarity in the Spirit.<sup>51</sup>

Keck further observes, in reflecting imaginatively on the afterlife: "Indeed, we may wonder if it is possible for someone to have experiences of God's presence and not desire to share them with others, just as the Triune God who is self-communicating love seeks to share his love with his creation."<sup>52</sup> The dead

50. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, p. 78.

51. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, p. 132. For a wonderful reflection on the intersection of these practices in the Orthodox tradition, see Ware, "'One Body in Christ,'" pp. 188-91. Mutual prayer is a fundamental relational practice of discipleship among the living; therefore, construing the church as the communion of saints suggests mutual prayer between the living and the dead. As Ware notes, "If, then, as members of a single family we are united by the bond of mutual prayer, and if within this family there is no division between living and departed, then it should surely be considered normal and natural that we pray for the departed, and ask the saints to pray on our behalf. Whether alive or dead, we belong to the same family: therefore, whether alive or dead, we pray for one another. Here on earth we pray for others: why should we not continue to pray for them after their death? Do they cease to exist, that we should cease to intercede for them? Here on earth we likewise request others to remember us in their prayers: and since in the risen Christ the saints are not divided from us but belong still to the same family, why should we not continue to ask them for their intercessions?" ("One Body in Christ," p. 189).

52. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 152.

pray for the living, we believe, because they are immersed in the joyous presence of God, which their souls shaped as self-communicating love cannot help but impart, but also because they remain disciples, wayfarers with us on the journey toward the kingdom.

One specific form of caregiving in particular is worth mentioning, namely, forgiveness and reconciliation. Given that central to God's remembering is the forgetting of our sin in reconciling us to himself, one of the concrete ways in which our remembering of the deceased is normed by God's prior act is as reconciliation. Bishop Kallistos Ware makes this point well:

All too easily it can happen that we postpone seeking a reconciliation with someone whom we have alienated, and death intervenes before we have forgiven each other. In bitter remorse, we are tempted to say to ourselves: "Too late, too late, the chance has gone forever; there is nothing more to be done." But we are altogether mistaken, for it is *not* too late. On the contrary, we can go home this very day, and in our evening prayers we can speak directly to the dead friend from whom we were estranged. Using the same words that we would employ if they were still alive and we were meeting them face to face, we can ask their forgiveness and reaffirm our love. And from that very moment our mutual relationship will be changed.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, remembering as reconciliation can be a transformative, renewing, even conversational, practice of mutual caregiving. Moreover, it may take different forms. It might entail acting so as to foster reconciliation between the deceased and another person or to make practical amends for a wrong one committed against the deceased. And beyond prayer and reconciliation, acts of remembering might also include attending to the deceased's former responsibilities — for example, visiting the deceased's elderly parents; carrying on the work of those martyred; providing companionship to those who mourn the loss.

And so, the Christian practice of funerals boldly immerses us in a theological reality — one comprised of a vibrant community between the living and those diminished to the point of death, sustained by God's gracious remembering. Through the rites we discover that the deceased remain present with us in the communion of saints, engaged together with us in mutual practices of remembrance as care. And if this is true for the deceased, how much more is it the case for those visibly among us? In learning to remember

53. Kallistos Ware, "'Go Joyfully': The Mystery of Death and Resurrection," in *Beyond Death: Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Life after Death*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Christopher Lewis (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 38.

the dead and that we are remembered by them, we are simultaneously reoriented toward those among us, living but diminished. We learn to remember those who grow old.

### **Saints and Disciples: Remembering Those Who Grow Old**

And so it turns out that making visits is a profoundly theological practice.<sup>54</sup> Through unassuming, everyday activities, ordinary folks in Sweetser, Indiana, engaged in an important mode of discipleship. They remembered the dead, through funerals and cemetery visits, and they remembered each other; they remembered those among them who had "grown old." In doing so, their lives gave witness to fundamentally different convictions about what it means to grow old and to what practices are appropriate for caring for the elderly among us.

Fundamental to these practices is a basic affirmation: that what is determinative for the elderly is not whether they qualify as "persons," nor their individual memory of their personal story, nor that they can share historical memories with others, but rather simply that they, as much as any other member of the body of Christ, are in fact "saints." To be clear, the term "saint" refers not to some degree of moral or spiritual perfection, implying that the elderly, because they have more time for spiritual introspection and prayer, are somehow closer to God. Indeed, as many age they seem to become the antithesis of our narrow notions of saints. Personal eccentricities magnify into embarrassing or frustrating obsessions; they become set in their ways, critical of innovation, cantankerous, loudly complaining of their loneliness and bodily afflictions. Moreover, little perfection or spiritual depth seems to be found in those who suffer dementia, who must be watched, fed, helped in the bathroom, and dressed, as hostility, obscenity, and irrational mutterings are

54. That visiting is a "practice" follows from Alasdair MacIntyre's well-known definition of "practice" in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 175. Visiting certainly is a "coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity," as my great-grandmother's news network would attest. There are certainly goods internal to it, standards of excellence which define it and systematically form participants in the virtues. These might include friendship, hospitality, being present to the other, patience, and, often, fortitude. Unlike many activities advanced as practices (e.g., chess-playing), visiting is a locally embodied practice open to all and engaged in by regular folks (mostly women). That this is the case speaks not against its status as a practice but may instead provide a corrective against elitist, universalized, and competitive accounts of practices. That it is theological as well is apparent from Jesus' own life, the corporal works of mercy, and the prophetic and Pauline injunctions to remember the widows.

tolerated. What might it mean, then, to look anew at our aging neighbors — indeed, our parents — and see them as saints? It means that the Spirit of Life who raised Jesus from the dead has been poured out on them and has transformed them into the very image of Christ. It means that God remains present and active with them, among us, in a vital and vigorous way, so that among us there is a mutual sharing of physical and spiritual goods.

Now, in some ways, this may not seem like a terribly profound claim. But I would argue that it has profound implications both for how the elderly construe themselves and for how the Christian community understands the status of growing old. As the relationship among the members of the communion of saints is constituted by practices of remembrance as care, so it should be with regard to those who grow old. While it is difficult to specify such practices in too much detail apart from their display in a concrete community, the broad outlines of such an approach can be sketched.

### *Growing Old in Discipleship*

Turning first to the elderly themselves, redescribing them as saints suggests that, even as they grow old, the elderly remain disciples. For those who grow old in Christian community, “retirement” is not an option. Just as death does not dispense one from continuing to follow the call to discipleship, the elderly, as members of the ecclesial community, remain called to a vocation, a ministry, to concrete practices of care modeled on God’s remembering. They remain called equally to the practices of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, to theological reflection, to prayer and worship, to liturgical ministry, to sharing the faith with the young, and to the promotion of social justice. The elderly minister to others in the community in a variety of ways, offering their historical memories, their example and wisdom, to those who seek to navigate paths they have already traversed — the struggles of marriage, child-rearing, or forgiveness and reconciliation. In continuing to follow the call of discipleship, they witness to the fact that identity is rooted not in employment or autonomous self-achievement, challenging the perspective of those of us preoccupied with these pursuits. Given the diversity and individuality among those who grow old, the vocations and ministries to which they are called will be as varied as for those at any other stage of life. The elderly, with the community, must continually discern how they can continue the work of discipleship as their circumstances change.<sup>55</sup> The com-

55. Marius L. Bressoud’s moving and compelling reflection on his own “personal” spiritual



## *Memory, Funerals, and the Communion of Saints*

munity must likewise foster this call and welcome their gifts of ministry and service, especially in public sacramental ministries.<sup>56</sup> And as importantly, the church must discern the vocation of those who are diminished, those with Alzheimer's, for example, who seem to have nothing to offer. They remain, after all, saints.

Thus, the communion of saints not only "forges intergenerational bonds across time that sustain faith in strange new times and places."<sup>57</sup> In recasting the elderly as saints and disciples, the communion of saints forges intergenerational bonds among those in the community. It challenges those approaches to "religion and aging" which situate the elderly in a passive, receptive position, as primarily recipients of the ministrations of others.

Construing the elderly as saints and disciples likewise challenges another troubling tenet of contemporary discourse on aging. As Mary M. Knutsen comments, "A common and influential image of human development in aging is that of an upward and then downward curve centered on work and economic productivity and characterized by a 'mid-life crisis' (the beginning of the downward curve) and finding its final denouement in retirement."<sup>58</sup> As was noted earlier, those who are in the "twilight" of their lives are characterized as spending a greater proportion of their time reminiscing about the past, since the past is all they have in terms of either identity or what they have to offer.<sup>59</sup> Understanding the elderly as members of the communion of

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journey in his "eighth decade" highlights this well. He finds that he is not merely called to a comfortable process of introspective personal reflection on his own spirituality but rather finds himself called to minister concretely, in a way he never would have anticipated, to a dying homeless man named Ramon. See Marius L. Bressoud, "A Slow Dying," *Second Opinion* 21, no. 1 (July 1995): 43-47.

56. This public, sacramental role is important to overcome the all too frequent marginalization of the elderly within their communities and to remind the church that without the elderly it is incomplete. This might mean, of course, that the "efficiency" of our public rituals may need to be sacrificed; the elderly may read the Scriptures more slowly as lectors; they may need assistance in distributing Communion and may take much longer than their crack, thirty-something counterpart. But their presence at the altar is crucial in challenging the fear of growing old and the devaluing of the elderly, outweighing the importance of completing Mass or worship in fifty-five minutes.

57. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, p. 85.

58. Mary M. Knutsen, "A Feminist Theology of Aging," in *Aging, Spirituality and Religion: A Handbook*, ed. Kimble et al., p. 466.

59. See, for example, the discussion of the practice of "life review" in David G. Hawkins, "Memory, Hold the Door," *Journal of Religion and Aging* 3, no. 3-4 (Spring-Summer 1987): 13-21, and Drew Christiansen, "Creative Social Responses to Aging," in *Aging*, ed. Cahill and Mieth, pp. 114-22. It is this construct of aging that fuels the ubiquitous practice of "life review," one which is "characterized by the progressive return to the consciousness of past experiences and,



saints, however, means, at minimum, that they have a future. While that future surely includes the experience of their own death, more importantly, it is a future that includes those who will remain behind. In that future, they will be reunited in a new and concrete way with those who have preceded them in death. And, although they may feel alone now, grieving the loss of their parents, spouse, siblings, and friends, the communion of saints reminds them that they are not — those who have gone before us remain with us.

### *Remembering As a Communal Practice*

Given the realities of aging, however, the elderly are not only disciples but need to be ministered to as well. As disciples, we are called to remember as God remembers — as concrete, particular, active, other-oriented, present, eucharistic, embodied, life-giving, relationship-constituting, faithful, and reconciling. This challenges human tendencies to count good intentions or mental recollection as remembering or to value interactions with the elderly that are primarily self-oriented and controlling.

To remember is to act; thus, remembering the elderly will be embodied in concrete activities.<sup>60</sup> As often as these activities may be meaningful and enjoyable, they may also be onerous, boring, painful, unpleasant, constraining, and take valuable time away from our schedules and priorities. As Keck reminds us, "remembering, after all, takes time, and . . . entails distinct responsibilities."<sup>61</sup>

The most basic act of remembering, and fundamental to all others, is simply the act of being present. As Keck astutely observes, "As anyone in a nursing home will tell us, not only is it important to be remembered, it is also

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particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts" (Hawkins, p. 18, quoting Robert N. Butler, "Life Review Therapy," *Geriatrics* 8 [November 1974]: 165). As a therapeutic technique aimed at the maintenance and preservation of the elderly's "self-image," it is unclear what role "life review" has in an ecclesial or pastoral context; it might be more properly located, and therefore modified, as a component of an ongoing practice of reconciliation.

60. It could also be suggested that concrete activities and encounters are required to sustain our very ability to remember anyone or anything. Moreover, we will find as we engage in concrete activities of remembering with the elderly that they become much more a part of who we are. This, then, will indeed make their deaths more painful, but at the same time we will find that "remembering" them when they are gone has become second nature.

61. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 58. For a realistic display of the fact that remembering (in this case, waiting on someone as he dies) takes time and challenges our desires for efficiency and control see Curtis W. Freeman, "What Shall We Do About Norman? An Experiment in Communal Discernment," *Christian Bioethics* 2, no. 1 (1996): 34-36.

crucial to be visited.”<sup>62</sup> Those who have visited nursing homes know how valuable a commodity such visits are for the residents and how devastating it is for those whose children never come. Like God’s remembering of us, our presence to the elderly as we remember them sustains them.

Beyond visiting, remembering takes as many forms as there are people who grow old. But certain common practices are important. Growing old invariably entails the loss of those who structure one’s life — spouses, siblings, parents, friends. An important concrete act of remembering is that of consolation and ministry to the grieving in times of death. We are called to the sometimes uncomfortable task of encouraging the elderly to talk about one who has died and of being present and listening as they do so, as they cry, not just during a “legitimate” period of mourning but on an ongoing basis.

Beyond simply listening, the *Order of Christian Funerals* counsels continuous, concrete practices of care for those who mourn, extending to “act[s] of kindness, for example, assisting them with some of the routine tasks of daily living” (no. 10). Assistance with the mundane and everyday is no less crucial for the elderly, examples of which could multiply: “assistance in activities that are a routine part of living: shopping, cooking, cleaning, banking, and so on . . . nursing chores, such as bathing, grooming, and supervising medication . . . sharing social activities such as visiting, listening to stories, sharing feelings, and so on . . . and [facilitating] the authority competent adults exercise over fundamental aspects of their lives.”<sup>63</sup>

All too often, these activities are assumed to be the sole responsibility of family members. As such, they can be overwhelming. The funeral rite, however, reminds us that remembering is a communal activity, that responsibility for remembering lies not only with family members but rather with the whole church. At minimum, dispersing the concrete, mundane tasks of care required to sustain the elderly makes the burden of doing so less onerous; but it also concretely renders the community as the body of Christ. As David Keck notes:

Supporting this Herculean (or better, Samsonian) task of the caregivers is one of the ways in which non-caregivers can most clearly fulfill their call to join the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes the diversity of the body’s parts as a way of describing the different gifts of the Spirit and tasks of diverse Christians. So too can we see that those who come by for visits with caregivers, perhaps

62. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 47.

63. Christiansen, “Creative Social Responses to Aging,” p. 117.

bringing home-made soup, or who serve as part-time caregivers in their different roles help to form the body of Christ into which Christians are baptized. These seemingly simple tasks (which require so much effort and are not done frequently) help make us one.<sup>64</sup>

But remembering as a communal practice can encompass more than the mundane. A wonderful display of a community which took seriously this responsibility can be found in Curtis Freeman's essay "What Shall We Do About Norman?"<sup>65</sup> Freeman recounts how his parish, "Norman's church family," found themselves charged unexpectedly with the task of deciding whether Norman, a seventy-nine-year-old friend and member who suffered a heart attack and fell into a permanent vegetative state (PVS), should be sustained with medical treatment or allowed to die. A task generally reserved as almost sacred for family members or special appointees, proxy consent became proper to them not only because of their friendship but because of Norman's "identity as a member of the community of God's new creation which we witnessed in his Christian baptism on May 9, 1926."<sup>66</sup> As he was one of the saints among them, the community found that remembering Norman took the form not only of keeping vigil with him in the hospital as he lay dying but also of an extended and deliberative communal process of discernment and eventually decision-making.

Freeman's account of his community's care for Norman also reminds us that from baptism to death, the community assumes responsibility for the faith of its members. The central moral question became for them:

How could we as a community of discernment assist Norman to live with integrity the life which he owned in baptism? . . . Even in a PVS Norman remained part of the community he joined in baptism, and he was still responsible for living his life in keeping with that baptismal pledge. Our role was to support and sustain him in those decisions which we understood to be consistent with faithful discipleship.<sup>67</sup>

Freeman's account renders the community as co-disciples, responsible not for helping its members to achieve the personal fulfillment of an autonomous self but rather for helping them to be faithful to the life embraced in baptism.

64. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 137.

65. Freeman's description of the parish's discernment process, and his theological analysis, resonates with many of the points made in this section.

66. Freeman, "What Shall We Do About Norman?" p. 26.

67. Freeman, "What Shall We Do About Norman?" pp. 26, 30.

Keck takes this claim one step further, suggesting that an important task in remembering the elderly may be to assume the responsibility of believing for them. While this certainly defies understandings of faith that privilege individual rationality and autonomy, it gains credence within a framework of communal identity premised in the resurrection:

Because the patient seems to lose all capacities of subjecthood, it is the work done by others for him which becomes crucial. As the community accepts the responsibility of believing for a newly-baptized infant, so too at the end of life does the church accept this task for those in end-stage dementia. . . . In light of Alzheimer's we come to recognize that we sometimes must do the believing for others. As we assume this heavy responsibility, we should consider that we have a particular responsibility not to underbelieve. That is, as we bear the fullness of a person through the last years of dementia, so too should we bear the abundance of the resurrection and God's work for us. Not everyone can bear this plenitude — either as a caregiver or a Christian — but, as caregivers strive to sustain the fullness of a person, so should the body of Christ seek to bear the fullness of his work.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, through concrete practices of remembering, the Christian community rescues the elderly — even those with Alzheimer's or those in a persistent vegetative state — from abandonment and neglect. It is in this context especially that failure to remember — or forgetting of the elderly — correlates with alienation and death, and thus becomes an act of sin. Forgetfulness sunders not only our relationship with God but also human relationships: "the adulterer forgets the spouse, the rich forget the poor, the friend forgets the friend. We forget the simplest acts of writing thank you and birthday cards. Perhaps we are too busy to remember."<sup>69</sup> For the elderly especially, "not to be remembered," to be forgotten, is a cause of deep pain and despair, sometimes even making them wish they no longer existed.

But we do forget. Perhaps we are too busy. The structures of aging, which remove the sick and elderly to places like nursing homes, facilitate our forgetfulness. Thus, crucial to practices of remembering are practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. In all the relationships entailed in this communion of saints, significant need remains for reconciliation: between the elderly and their companions who have died as well as between the elderly and those who comprise their communities. Remembering the elderly as an act

68. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, pp. 91, 134.

69. Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 58.

of presence will require the painful remembering of harms they have committed against us and we against them. To be a people capable of remembering as God remembers, we must remember our sins, committed in the past, as well as our ongoing failures, and in remembering seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Such reconciliation will be not be easy, nor will it be superficial, simply therapeutic, or painless. The remembered acts of sin, failure, and harm in all their ugliness will renew themselves upon us, released from where they have festered. We will recognize them as part of our mutual identities; we will recognize that the past cannot be changed nor, in most instances, made right. On their own such acts would continue to sunder the very relationship for whose sake we remember them. Thus, reconciliation must be normed and made possible by the act of remembering which constitutes our unity, namely, the Eucharist. Only in this context, when the act of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ likewise renews itself on us, can practices of reconciliation as remembrance be transformative.<sup>70</sup>

Not only does the Eucharist provide a context for enabling reconciliation, it also provides the center from which further liturgical practices of remembrance spring. The prayer of the community is a form of remembering that makes present and thereby unites those separated with the community. In the prayers of petition or intercession, the community prays for those who are sick and for those absent from the worship gathering. As the funeral liturgy attends to the grief that accompanies death, so the Christian community needs to attend to the fears, diminishment, and grief that accompany the losses and illnesses of aging, praying for the specific needs of those in their midst. Related sacramental activities, such as commissioning ministers to bring Communion to the sick and shut-ins and the practice of anointing of the sick, are further acts whereby the community as *ecclesia* makes itself present to those who are separated.

This eucharistic context suggests one final dimension of practices of remembering. As noted earlier with regard to the dead, an important part of the refusal to deny death is the attention to the body during the funeral rites — from the personal care of the bodies of the dead to the presence of the

70. As Westphal notes, such practices of reconciliation are not only individual but require communal repentance as well: "Those who stand in this perpetual need of revitalization and re-direction include not only the individual believers who make up the community of faith but the community itself as a corporate body. Remembrance involves personal and collective renewal at the same time" ("Lest We Forget," p. 11). In the context of communities who have marginalized the aging or who have sinned against an individual member, acts of reconciliation as practices of remembering would be indicated.



body at the funeral liturgy, the materiality of the eucharistic celebration, and the affirmation that resurrection is indeed bodily. Likewise, learning to read aging through the baptismal and eucharistic context of funerals helps to challenge cultural tendencies to deny the bodies of the elderly: to treat them as a medical problem to be solved, as undignified failures from the norm of which we should be ashamed, or, in a dualist modality, as separable from a brain-centered notion of personhood. These ways of situating aging bodies each suggest that real bodies might be expendable: if the "problems" they present cannot be solved with technology, if they compromise dignity individually defined, or if specific intellectual faculties become impaired.

Over against these constructs, the affirmation of the resurrection of the body situates aging bodies differently. The resurrection affirms that our bodies, our very materiality given to us in our creation, are integral to who we are as persons. Our bodies are members of the body of Christ, a capacity or character that aging cannot erase. God has entered into this very materiality and so, even in a diminished capacity, our bodies remain vehicles of God's grace. Contrary to accounts that construe aging bodies as falling away from the human norm, Mary Knutsen suggests that aging bodies be read rather as an actualization of the incarnation and paschal mystery:

Bodies are the very medium of communion with God, with others, and with the earth — and so the medium of all joy. . . . At the center of God's own triune life [is] the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, God "deep in the flesh" of bodily, finite, cruciform human life. For Christians, growth into the actuality of particular, finite bodies with age is an ever deepening journey into God "deep in the flesh" in Jesus Christ, an ever deepening actualization of our baptism into the corporeal and communal body of Christ. Hence aging and death need to be seen not just as part of the "downward slope" of human life but in light of the paschal mystery of Christ.<sup>71</sup>

That this light is the paschal mystery is important, for as crucial as the resurrection is in affirming the intrinsic value and importance of our bodies as they age, the crucified, suffering body of Christ cannot yet be dismissed. The embodied experience of growing old is often one of significant physical infirmity, illness, loss, and suffering, and the "fear of pain and suffering" could be added as a third to Drew Christiansen's twin fears of aging mentioned earlier (the fear of dependence and the fear of abandonment and neglect). The journey into actuality described by Knutsen is one in

71. Knutsen, "A Feminist Theology of Aging," p. 473.

which we enter increasingly into our finitude and the fallen nature of creation. Although we trust that our bodies will be taken up into the resurrection and ultimately transformed when creation is renewed, for now the diminishment and disintegration of our bodies — even unto death — must be seen “as intimately connected with sin, which crucified Christ and which violates and rips life with each other and God.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, while such diminishment is not to be welcomed and can legitimately be addressed, neither is it to be escaped by eliminating or devaluing the bodies of the elderly. Situated within the paschal mystery, the elderly in their bodies, and we as we tend to them, meet Christ who suffers the depths of pain, suffering, sickness, and death.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the practices of remembering, especially those that entail particular attention to the bodies of the aging, take on new significance. Normed by the Eucharist, they take on a sacramental dimension in their own right.

### Lord, for Your Faithful People, Life Is Changed, Not Ended

Thus we find that theological re-reading of memory, practiced through funerals and the communion of saints, challenges the dominant ideology of the self that so devastates us as we grow old. It challenges the ideology of personhood as comprised solely of rationality and autonomy. The communion of saints reminds us that dependence, or rather interdependence,<sup>74</sup> is not a developmental and alien challenge to the foundation of our person-

72. Knutsen, “A Feminist Theology of Aging,” p. 474.

73. It is important to remain cautious when mapping suffering on to Christ’s Passion. As Curtis Freeman aptly states, “The connection between the suffering of Christ and our own suffering is not an easy one to make. Nevertheless, when guided by the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, reading and ministry it is possible for the Christian to envision her pain as the sacramental *anamnesis* of the cross” (“Redeeming Love and Suicide: An ‘Evangelical Catholic’ Response to Amundsen,” *Christian Bioethics* 1, no. 3 [December 1995]: 320, note 5; Freeman here cites Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], pp. 86-89). Such a reading should be available in the community to those so habituated through practices of *askesis* (as were the martyrs) who are thereby capable of taking it upon themselves; when forced upon another, it becomes a weapon of torture. Richard, “Toward a Theology of Aging,” and others also explore the relationship between the suffering of aging and the Passion through the concept of *kenosis*. See also Christiansen, “A Catholic Perspective.”

74. The use of the term “interdependence” is not simply a matter of semantics but rather one of accuracy. The use of the language of “dependence” with regard to the elderly severs their present situation from the larger context of their overall life, which when viewed more broadly would reveal a complex tapestry of interdependence construed over a lifetime.

hood but rather is constitutive of Christian identity from the beginning.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, the reality of the communion of saints situates the elderly as equal partners in the body of Christ; without the elderly, the church is not complete.<sup>76</sup> Thus, abandonment and neglect of the elderly are not only unfortunate afflictions attendant upon aging; when present within Christian communities they stand as indictments of sinfulness and of the communities' failure to be the church.

Likewise this account challenges the ideology of memory, critiquing its continued privileging of a notion of the self individually construed. A theological reading of growing old locates identity not individually but rather communally. One's identity as a member of the body of Christ comes not as an individual achievement but rather as a gift, as God remembers us and makes us saints, participants in the holy life of the Trinity. Such an identity, such a foundation for who we are, the ravages of aging cannot efface, not even unto death.

What becomes important, then, is not so much that those who grow old can remember but rather that we, as a community, actively and concretely remember them. In so doing, we become a people of memory, faithful to God's way of sustaining his creation — a people for whom life will always change but never end. This my great-grandmother began to teach me when I was ten years old.<sup>77</sup>

75. More broadly speaking, such interdependence is likewise constitutive of human identity as well, if one affirms the conviction that humans are created in the *imago dei*. The image of God as Trinitarian suggests that identity is not located within an individual but rather is located in the spaces between myself and others, constructed through the relational actions of remembering that occur in those spaces. In short, my identity is comprised in my relationship with others. As Knutsen notes: "Within the life of the triune God, and among all created life in God, relationality generates each personal identity, and the personal identities thus generated in turn constitute and transform the dynamics of their relationality" ("A Feminist Theology of Aging," p. 471). Similarly see Freeman: "sacredness . . . is not an ontic category *within the self* but a dialogic notion *between the self and others*" ("What Shall We Do About Norman?" p. 24).

76. The reality of the communion of saints also reminds us that the church is equally comprised of others who may be marginalized or excluded from our communities — the disabled, the poor, the mentally ill, those of different racial or ethnic backgrounds — and likewise calls us to redefine their roles among us. Many of the reflections in this essay would apply equally to other constituencies.

77. That this essay exists is certainly a testimony to the communion of saints. It could not have been written without the material assistance of my Nonny and others who inspired me as I wrote; my colleagues Terrence W. Tilley, Sandra Yocum Mize, Michael Barnes, Dennis Doyle, Una Cadegan, James Heft, Jack McGrath, and Maureen Tilley who read earlier drafts of the essay; Stanley Hauerwas who called it into existence; and my friends who are gracious enough to remember me (even and especially when I'm not so good at remembering) and, in so doing, sustain my work and my life.